

Greenpoint

by Danny Goodman

Josh and Madeline listened to Nada Surf and made love. Madeline said that Matthew Caws's voice relaxed her, made her wet. The thought made Josh uncomfortable.

She rode him. Josh tried to focus on her, his new wife. He found her sexier now than in previous years; the weight she had gained over the past months gave her a shape that Josh loved. Curves, he called them, though not in front of Madeline. He was not allowed to broach that subject.

Josh looked to the ceiling and Madeline came. He was sure her scream escaped through thin walls. He couldn't look away from her then, and he traced a spider vein over her thigh with his fingertips. Madeline trembled and sang softly. Josh slipped his hand from leg to stomach, his two favorite parts of her. Madeline's eyelids opened. She stopped trembling and slapped his hand away.

"Fat," she said. Her voice mimicked a child's, high and whiny.

"You're ridiculous," he said and pressed his palm across her soft, abdominal skin.

Madeline pushed off Josh. He lay on the bed, flaccid and a bit cold. He looked at her differently than she looked at him.

"Why do you ruin things?" Madeline asked and left the room.

Josh listened to her footsteps and watched her naked body cross the apartment and disappear into the sun-drenched kitchen.

The overcast afternoon created a blanket of gray over the Manhattan skyline. Josh enjoyed his perch on the Greenpoint apartment building, legs stretched across an Adirondack chair. He sipped coffee and listened to Ben suck at leftover pieces of chicken salad stuck between his teeth.

"She's still in love with him," Josh said.

Ben shifted in his chair. "You're an idiot," he said.

"He had a huge dick."

Ben groaned and flicked a remnant of chicken off the roof.

"She told me. After we had sex for the first time, she said Andre was *big*. I almost cried." Josh drank too quickly, and the coffee pooled beneath his tongue. He pulled in cold air through pursed lips.

"She's your wife, man," Ben said, amused. His Brooklyn accent carried. "You fucking won."

"I know she thinks about him when I'm inside her." Josh tongued the small blister forming in his mouth.

"Jesus Christ," Ben said, bugging out his eyes, "you're a whiner."

"How is this whining? I'm talking. I can't talk to you about this shit?" Josh stood and walked to the edge of the roof deck.

The wall around the roof was lined with cemented-down pots of jasmine. On breezy days, his apartment, one floor below, filled with their scent. Josh fingered a petal and looked towards the city. Clouds sank low, allowing the very tips of buildings to peak into them.

"It's like he's still in there, you know? She still feels him in there. It's why she listens to the music." Josh let the coffee mug dangle over the edge. He felt his grip slipping, a fraction every second. He wanted to watch the ceramic pieces impact and scatter. His thumb, though, pressed tight against the handle.

"You've got to get past this, Josh. You're married. Maddie loves you." Ben gave Josh a firm punch on the shoulder. "You've got to get past this."

The mug flew from Josh's hand. He watched in horror as it sailed onto the adjacent roof and bounced. The clang seemed to echo for blocks. As it hit again, the handle snapped off, though the rest remained intact. Josh's hand held its shape, as if the mug remained there. He wondered, then, if he'd meant to let go. "It didn't break," he said.

"Damnedest thing," Ben said. "Strong coffee."

Josh stood alone on the crowded platform at Graham Avenue. The crisp morning settled into the dank station. Hands pushed hard into his jacket pockets, Josh watched his own breath against the blackness of the subway tunnel. He resisted the urge to lean forward when the train ripped past.

As his ears popped beneath the East River, Josh thought of Madeline. He knew plainly Madeline had not seen Andre in more than a year and that the encounter had been accidental. It didn't matter. Josh imagined, in some kind of nightmarish universe, he would run into all of Madeline's ex-boyfriends in one place at one time. He turned up the volume on his iPod to drown out the thought.

The train left 1st Avenue, and Josh caught the attention of a young woman sitting in front of him. He stood across from her and could see himself reflected in her dark-purple-rimmed glasses. She smiled, and Josh noticed freckles on her Irish-pale skin. She read *The Economist* and tapped her foot against the floor. Josh smiled back. "I don't think I've seen you before," Josh said. He felt fidgety.

The young woman slid her glasses up her nose. "Do you know all the passengers on the L train?"

"I didn't mean it like that," he said. "You just get used to the faces."

"Well, I'm a new face," she said and leaned a bit closer. "Elizabeth."

"Hello, Elizabeth." Josh stopped before saying his own name, leaving his right hand tucked away.

The train stopped. A mass of people shoved their way into the car. There was nowhere left to stand. The doors closed and opened, herding in stragglers. As the door opened for a third time, accompanied by the standard ding, Josh noticed the *Union Square* sign. His stop. He shoved his way out of the car. Standing on the platform, Josh searched for Elizabeth through blurry windows. The train inched to a start, and he saw her. She looked up from the magazine and smiled. Then Josh, for reasons he was unsure of, waved.

Madeline sat on the couch, eating noodles with chopsticks out of a Chinese takeout container. She was already in her pajamas. The apartment smelled of shrimp and soy sauce. Josh's stomach called out angrily.

"Hi," Josh said, locking the door and dropping his messenger bag on the loveseat.

"Hey, Sweetie," Madeline replied, mouth full of lo mein.

"You couldn't wait?" Josh stood behind the couch and spoke to the back of Madeline's head.

"I got home a little early. I was hungry. It's just leftovers." She changed channels and continued eating.

Josh stared at her. He wondered if she could feel it. He said things to her in his mind that he knew he would never say aloud. He stood and walked into the bedroom. As he undressed, Madeline turned around.

"Whatcha doing?" she asked, sounding sugary.

"Taking a shower. A lot of people touched me on the train today. I feel disgusting." Josh suddenly felt uncomfortable, Madeline looking at his naked frame.

"Can I come?" Madeline put down the container and leaned over the couch. "Please."

Josh chided himself for looking at her breasts, which he could see through her tank top. He wanted her, and it made him nauseated. "No," he said.

As he shut the bedroom door, Josh wanted to scream. No words, just the noise, the release. It felt like something was gnawing on his organs.

Shampoo was running down his forehead when Madeline walked into the shower. She opened the glass door and touched Josh from behind before he realized she was there. He wanted to tell her to leave, to go back to her leftovers, but he didn't. He couldn't remember the last time she touched him, unprovoked. It was pity, he knew. Josh kept his eyes closed. She whispered something to him, but he couldn't hear her. He came quickly before the shampoo burned his eyes. Madeline said, "I'm sorry" before she left.

Ben and Josh jogged along the southern edge of McCarren Park. Ben made unpleasant faces at the women they passed. Josh disliked the effect his friend had on women.

"They're not smiling, you know," Josh said. He sucked air and ignored the knifing behind his ribcage.

"Are you kidding me?" Ben asked. "Pick one. I'll make it happen. Pick one." He pointed his finger at different women.

Beads of sweat formed in the balding areas of Josh's scalp, mostly near the front. He kept his brown hair short, shaved down. Madeline said it made him look more bald. Josh, aside from a correction in grammar, declined to respond. He thought, perhaps, they should not broach that subject either.

"Why are you like this?" Josh asked. He looked at Ben's olive skin, wavy black hair, athletic build. "You can't fuck your way through New York City."

"Watch me," Ben said, speeding up and leaving Josh several yards behind.

Josh caught himself searching the faces; the thought of actually seeing Elizabeth was more frightening than anything. He ran faster.

"How about you move your ass, eh?" Ben yelled. His sneakers kicked up dust as they ran through the softball infield.

Josh coughed and caught up with Ben. "I met someone on the train," he said. He felt confident, saying it out loud.

"What's his name?" Ben asked, running his shoulder into Josh.

"She was just someone."

"Nice rack?"

"I looked at her, this woman. She was stunning. But I didn't want her." Josh shook his head. He hadn't thought of it before. He smiled and wanted to vomit. "It was the fucking music."

"What?" Ben asked, raising one eyebrow. He said something to a passing female jogger, who didn't respond.

"On my iPod. I was listening Nada Surf."

Josh stopped. A moment passed before Ben noticed and walked back to him.

"It's in my fucking head," Josh said, "the lullaby. Like *A Clockwork Orange* or something. I think of Madeline."

Ben laughed. He laughed longer than Josh thought appropriate. When Ben looked up at him, though, he seemed austere.

"You're unbelievable, man. I don't fucking get you," Ben said, breathless.

"I can't tell you this?"

"You're the only person I know who gets depressed when he realizes that he's in love with his wife." Ben started to run again, then immediately turned back to Josh. "You look at other women, and you want Maddie. I might just fucking kill you right now."

Josh looked at his friend and laughed. He wasn't sure where the laugh had come from, but it was there. Flooding out. Ben leaned in and slapped Josh lightly on his face.

"I just want the good, Ben. I want the good." Josh slumped onto the grass, which was cold as day turned to night.

Ben reached into his knee-high sock and pulled out a pack of American Spirits. He lit one and stared down at Josh.

"The good's there, man. Right in front of you," Ben said, taking nicotine into his lungs.

"You're ridiculous. What is this, 1983? Who the hell smokes after jogging?"

"Hipsters, Josh. Hipsters. Get with it."

Ben extended his arm to Josh. The two walked back through the park and talked about anything but Madeline. The wind picked up over Brooklyn, and Josh took long, purposeful steps to avoid the chill.

Madeline kept the music low at first. She gripped Josh's chest. Josh closed his eyes and let go.

Madeline turned up the volume. "That's my favorite part."

"What part?" Josh asked. He leaned into her and exhaled over her jaw line.

"That line. *I know the last page so well, I can't read the first,*" she sang.

Josh realized, for the first time, that Madeline had a pleasant singing voice.

"It's sad, though," he said.

Madeline kept singing and rolled away from Josh. Her naked bottom, Josh thought, still felt wonderful against his skin.

"The next line is *so I just don't start*," Josh said. "That's sad."

"It's not sad. It's gorgeous." Madeline spoke softer than before and buried her face in the down pillow.

"He doesn't start. He knows how it will end, so he doesn't start. That's awful." Josh's voice cracked, and he cleared his throat.

Madeline pulled on her white tank top without leaving bed. Her leg slipped in between Josh's. He shifted his body closer to her and kissed her back. Goosebumps formed on her skin and Josh, for a moment, felt that Madeline was enjoying him. He leaned down again, but before he reached her, Madeline slid away. She stood next to the bed, wearing only the tank top, with her back to Josh.

"Why can't it just be good?" Josh asked. He couldn't look away from her. He still, after their years and fights, could imagine himself with no one else.

"Because you're so desperate for it to be good that you won't let it be good." Madeline's voice was strong, sure. Josh imagined that she'd practiced the words in her head for some time. She was simply waiting for the question to be asked.

Madeline stood beside the bed. Josh wanted to say something else. Instead, he rolled over and pretended to sleep. There were no words. Madeline walked into the kitchen, and Matthew Caws's voice filled the apartment. He sang about Bob Dylan and Wonder Woman. Josh tried to let the refrain pacify him. Madeline's footsteps mixed with the music. She entered the bedroom, Chinese takeout and chopsticks in hand. She sat beside Josh and handed him a set of sticks.

"It's still cold," she said, taking a bite.

The next song started, and Josh chewed on lo mein. "I like this song," he said.

Madeline nodded and leaned back against the pillow. She fell asleep not long after. Josh watched her before resting his head on her stomach. He touched her fingertips with his own. They awoke in the morning, having slept above the sheets. There was lo mein on the blanket, and Nada Surf played on shuffle. The room smelled of soy sauce and jasmine.

